

From Eliade to Sells

Sean Hannan
Dec. 3, 2013

Mircea Eliade, “Archetypes & Repetition,” from *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (1949; tr. 1954)

Before we get to Eliade’s readings of specific kinds of myth or ritual, we should linger awhile on the initial claim that grounds those readings: “the symbol, the myth, the rite, express, on different planes and through the means proper to them, a *complex system of coherent affirmations about the ultimate reality of things*, a system that can be regarded as constituting a metaphysics.” (p. 3) In other words: even though the ‘archaic’ myths Eliade’s looking at are not identical to the metaphysical systems of later philosophical accounts of the world, they are doing similar kinds of work. Even if they aren’t using words that translate to “being” or “reality,” they are talking ‘about’ *being* and *reality*.

More specifically, Eliade argues that, for archaic humanity, acts only acquired “meaning” or “value” once they were seen as *repetitions* of primordial, *archetypal* acts. (4) This kind of repetition is what elevates mundane activity from the neutral realm of the *profane* to the higher realm of the *sacred*. Later he equates *meaning* and *value* with being and reality; (11) so we can begin to see how he thinks we can find out what archaic people think about ‘reality’ by looking at what they take to be archetypically meaningful.

Eliade then gives us a litany of examples from different cultures, each of which is meant to demonstrate that sacred spaces, objects, or practices receive their sacredness from their repetition of some primordial or celestial archetype. (Think here of such figures as the absolute Center, the *Axis Mundi*, the Sacred Mountain, and so on; 12.) He then extends this logic into the matter of sacred *time*: each ritually meaningful act is performed, in some sense, *at the same time* as the archetypal act. The sacred act thus breaks out of profane time and reactivates a lost primordial moment. (22, 35)

The grand finale, at least in this chapter, is a comparison between *archaic ontology* and modern humanity. Whereas the archaic person finds meaning and reality only in repeating actions that originated outside themselves, the modern person (in Eliade’s estimation) finds meaning and reality in pursuing their own self-driven ends. This kind of *individualism*, wherein we all have our unique place in *history* and our particular gift to give the world, might just be incompatible with the archaic way of fitting people into sacred categories that both predate and postdate any individual. (44-47)

As a result, modern humanity might face a crisis of meaning or of being, at least if it fails to justify its rejection of the archaic model of finding meaning and being in primordial archetypes. For now, Eliade just leaves us with this dichotomy: on the one hand, we have the everlasting circulation of the same acts, bestowing sacred meaningfulness for anyone who happens to repeat them properly; on the other, we have utter historical novelty, the freedom of humanity to seek meaning anywhere, but at the risk of finding it nowhere.

Jonathan Z. Smith, “The Wobbling Pivot,” from *Map Is Not Territory* (1978)

Smith gives us his take on Eliade from two distinct vantage points. He begins with a broad overview of Eliade’s methodology, but then zooms in on a fairly specific sub-section of Eliade’s findings. On a general level, he tells us that Eliade is interested in *patterns of symbolic interrelationship*.

By studying such patterns across cultures, we are supposed to be able to fit many diverse kinds of symbolism into certain overarching schemas. The most obvious such schema is that of *the sacred and the profane*. The sacred is associated with the extraordinary, the paradoxical, and the idea of order, whereas the profane is linked to the ordinary, the neutral, and the chaotic. (91)

But this is where Smith thinks we need to zoom in more closely. He's willing to accept Eliade's framework in broad strokes, but he's not convinced about this particular divvying up of *order* (as sacred) and *disorder* or *chaos* (as profane). According to this picture, there would be a primordial order which is degraded in profane time and which can only be restored through acts that repeat that pattern of order.

Smith, for his part, is not convinced that disorder matches all that well with the neutrality of the profane. Instead, he suggests that it might be a kind of constructive counterpart to primordial order. Disorder—or chaos—would then also belong to the sacred. (97-98) What opposes sacred order-and-disorder is only profane neutrality.

Smith ends by listing a few more emendations to Eliade's project, some more substantial than others. He reminds us that *center-language* should not be understood in a narrowly literalistic way, (98) and that not every originary event is meant to be repeated, properly speaking. (99-100) Most crucially, he calls for us to shift away from Eliade's *evolutionary* dichotomy (between archaic and modern) in favor of Smith's own *locative-utopian* dichotomy. (101-102) The virtue of this switch is that it refers to how cultures from any time-period either seek their figurative center or rather diverge from it in search of something else. In terms of time itself, this means that we no longer have a *cyclical-linear* dichotomy, but rather a *spectrum of temporal possibilities* that can be actualized by specific cultures, all on the basis of whether they seek a return to a foundational center or instead reject such a return in favor of some sort of novelty.

Bruce Lincoln, "In Praise of the Chaotic," from *Gods & Demons, Priests & Scholars* (2012)

Lincoln zooms in still more tightly on the question of *order* and *chaos*. He announces plainly that he's entering into this storied debate between his predecessors in the history of religions. In his eyes, though, we should not make claims so general that they can't be defended. Instead, we should look to *specific concepts* within their *cultural contexts* and try to make responsible observations on their basis.

To that end of specificity, Lincoln starts out by differentiating between *the chaotic* (as this whole family of mythical concepts) and *chaos* proper (as a general sense of dynamic disorder). (109) After whisking us through readings of Greek, Norse, and Zoroastrian myths, Lincoln winds up uncovering a primordial crime. In the beginning, there was the chaotic: pure potentiality without shape. Order arose out of the chaotic as its reshaping into actual realities. But once order had become dominant, it *reordered* the cosmic system of values, so that the primordial chaotic is rebranded as mere chaos, the negatively valued degeneration of foundational order. (118-119)

Eliade had posited order as primordial. Smith had contested this and made disorder come first. Lincoln, in effect, says that they were both wrong. Eliade's account is too simplistic: it merely accepts the dominant order's presentation of itself as absolutely primal. Smith's intervention is understandable, but it too falls short by equating chaos with disorder, the degenerate offspring of order. Chaos, in Lincoln's view, is a primordial 'something else.' It is *pure potentiality*—even the very possibility of order and disorder themselves.

But to understand why Lincoln makes this intervention, it's not enough to simply repeat that 'chaos came first—the end.' Rather, what made the whole discussion between Eliade and Smith inconclusive was their shared inattention to the role of *power*. It is only because the religious system of values is mediated by power that dominant order was able to reshape that system so as to cause all this confusion in the first place.

Topics for Discussion

1. Archaic Ontology: What do we make of Eliade's search for 'archaic ontology?' What does he mean by either of those terms? Is *archaic* a purely chronological category? If not, can we sketch out its boundaries or limits? And what would the content of an *ontology* be, whether for archaic or non-archaic societies?
2. Mythological Meaning & Metaphysics of Being: Do we find plausible Eliade's claim that archaic *mythologies* do the same kind of work as later metaphysical *systems*? Can we responsibly assume that we have access to what certain cultures thought about 'being' or 'reality,' even if their languages didn't make room for words like that? In Eliadesque terms: Can a thing be present if its word is lacking? And how does that relate to Eliade's apparent equation of 'meaning' and 'value' with 'being?' (Finally: what would Ricoeur say to all this?)
3. Exemplarity & Generality: Do all of Eliade's *examples* fit into his *general* patterns and archetypes? Even if we spot some that seem to be ill-fitting or even totally out of place, what would be at stake in our discovery? Would such exceptions threaten the scope and goal of the whole project? (Think here of broad claims like: "'Thus the gods did; thus men do.' This Indian adage summarizes all the theory underlying rituals in all countries." [E, 21])
4. Smith v Eliade: How incisive do you take Smith's emendations of Eliade to be? Does recognizing the sacredness of *chaos* fundamentally alter Eliade's paradigm of sacred order? And what about the new *locative-utopian* opposition? Do these terms insulate us from the same critiques we could level at Eliade about cultural reductionism or insensitivity?
5. The Concept of Power: Lincoln introduces the concept of *power* into the Eliade-Smith debate over the limits of the sacred and the profane. Does that turn to power dynamics count as an intervention into the debate those two scholars of religion were having? Or does it constitute a shift away from their conversation and the beginning of a new one?
6. Power & the Public Sphere: In the subsequent readings from Sells and Ricoeur (*The Just*), we find a return from the supposedly disconnected realm of textual interpretation to the world of communal experience. We re-enter the *public sphere*, where it's impossible to discount the kind of *power dynamics* that Lincoln has already brought into play for us. How does Lincoln's use of the concept of power relate to such re-entry into the public square? Would Lincoln's approach to religion ultimately lead us to more direct interventions into sociopolitical debates? And would this look at all like the work that Sells or the late Ricoeur are doing?
7. Phenomenology of Religion: Already in the *Symbolism of Evil*, Ricoeur expressed dissatisfaction with the *phenomenology of religion* as it was practiced at the time. Given that Eliade can be seen as one of the chief practitioners of that 'phenomenology,' what do you think the source of Ricoeur's dissatisfaction might have been? Weren't both thinkers trying to get at aspects of experience—even *religious experience*—by way of a *hermeneutic* approach to ancient texts? But if there was a substantive difference between them, what does this say about Ricoeur's own intervention into the phenomenological discussion surrounding religion?
8. The Modern & the Traditional: Both Ricoeur and Eliade appear anxious over the relationship between modern humanity and the traditional components of society. But are they the same kinds of *anxiety*? Do both thinkers have the same sorts of concerns about how to put the *modern* into relation with the *traditional*? Could Ricoeur's advice to 'let myths be myths' preserve, for modern humanity, the kind of sacred meaning that Eliade finds incompatible with our current historical mindset?